

MODES OF ADDRESS IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSE AND MEANINGS ASCRIBED TO IT BY STUDENTS

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Education Sector– University Education

Classification of Research Areas in EAD

Macro Level – EAD System and theories

EAD Research Methods and Knowledge Transfer

**Intermediate Level – Management, Organization and Technology – Education
Technology**

**Micro Level – Distance Education (EAD) Teaching and Learning –
Learners' Features**

Nature – Research Report

Class – Scientific Research

SUMMARY

This research was based on the conception of the undergraduate course in Pedagogical Sciences, Bachelor's degree, from the University of Anhanguera-UNIDERP, Distance Education (EAD, because of its acronym in Portuguese) system, modes of address in distance education courses and meanings produced ascribed to it by students . The study articulated the concepts related to modes of address, according to Elizabeth Ellsworth, and of reception, according to Jesus Martin-Barbero. The results showed that students do not feel fully identified with the representation systems offered by the course and that local teachers play an extremely important role, thus contributing to the reduction of students' dropout rates. The possibility to learn through an EAD system was characterized as an opportunity, expressed by many people as a dream which became true.

Key words: Distance education; modes of address; reception

INTRODUCTION

Aiming at helping universities become guiding institutions for the construction of more fair social settings, the goal of the National Education Plan (“PNE” because of its acronym in Portuguese) was to achieve a coverage of higher education studies equivalent to 30% of the population ranging between 18 and 24 years in 2000 (Brazil, 2001). Therefore, the offer of undergraduate Distance Education courses in our country has expanded dramatically. Figures, as far as enrolment is concerned, pursuant to a research study performed by Favero and Franco (2006), grow at an average 6% rate per annum. Nevertheless, in spite of the advantages of this model, dropout rates are very high.

Aimed at reducing students’ dropout, several pedagogic models are being offered in the market, with a strong flexibility of courses, days of study, interaction, different methodologies and technologies. This invites us to revisit the current courses models. What are the reasons that lead a student to take a distance education course? For the student who sees in Higher Education the opportunity of a change in life *status* it has, when it becomes a reality, an impact on the construction of the identity of that subject.

A course, when prepared, is not addressed to any student. The student who will feel identified will be a student feeling represented by the signification systems transmitted by the course and which make him feel sure about age, class, race and gender. It is necessary that the student recognizes himself in the strategies by which the course identifies who is and who may be its student.

It is our intention to review the modes of address present in a Distance Education course and the meanings ascribed to it by students. Initially, it is necessary to understand that no student is exactly what the course projected and every student will be subject to different modes of address at the same time, not only by the course, but also by other social and cultural products. Therefore, a full set of possibilities is negotiated throughout the course with the students. A set of possibilities that articulates social elements with the internal features of the subjects. This research aimed at investigating and evaluating the modes of address present in distance education courses and the meanings ascribed to it by students, based on the conception of the undergraduate course

in Pedagogical Sciences, bachelor's degree, from the University of Anhanguera-UNIDERP, EAD system.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REFERENCE

Interactions in the EAD system are very important. In that scenario, reception analysis is guided by some basic premises: reception is interaction. The course may have certain significance for some people and not for others. It is necessary that the student, in that process, establishes an identification relationship with the course: its images, its texts, its teachers, didactic books, tele-lessons, portfolio, library, Portal, etc. Those words refer to the pedagogic work and, therefore, the broad curricular proposal of the course contains a mode of address and so does the pedagogic work of teachers when preparing their material. The notion of modes of address was developed by cinema theorists. In the cinematographic world, the mode of address always seeks to anticipate the profile of the audience to be reached. Therefore, directors seek to establish the position of the subject to address their artistic productions. Ellsworth (2001) suggests that the mode of address of a film aims at addressing any piece of communication to somebody and, as it is always intentional, seeks to influence how and from where the interlocutor or member of the audience should read the film addressed to him. Thus, every student is a "direct addressee", showing that what is said, what is shown (and any implicit information) in the contents of the course as a whole, is the best for him. Nevertheless, analyzing the paper developed by Martin-Barbero (1997), which highlights that the reception process is an interaction process, showing another perspective of communication as a meaning negotiation process, we understand the receptor as somebody who puts in motion his cultural universe to construe what appears in the media. The receptor is an active subject, holder of his own place, which may be different from the place from which the course curriculum speaks to him. Therefore, there is no way to make sure that the meanings proposed by teachers (production) are those taken by receptors. We brought that data to our research field and analyzed the different media environments of the course:

- *Interactive Lessons – visual, teachers, dynamics, language*
- *On-Site Lessons – format, teachers, dynamics and language*

- *Local Teacher – dynamics and meaning*
- *Student's Portal– images, messages and format*
- *Electronic Tutorship – format, availability and efficiency*
- *Book – Content and images*
- *Assessments – format and content*
- *Portfolio – format*

The capacity to use different media environments, by virtue of available technologies, to access information and cooperate in the production of new knowledge was an essential condition for students who were ready to interact with these environments to be able not only to absorb the maximum of each of them, as different interaction modes among themselves, without deviating from their learning path or becoming lost in the multiple meanings and formats absorbed by students from each environment, because reception was different for each of them. The main differences appeared in the importance and the meanings ascribed to each of these environments by students. We reformulated ideas and made associations through the interaction and the concepts received. In that exchange, we extend our learning process and students adopted that practice as their way of learning.

METHODOLOGY

The course, briefly expressed, adopts the following methodology: Two-hour, live, semi on-site lessons given via satellite by specialized teachers and two-hour on-site lessons given by the “local teacher”, a graduate in Pedagogical Sciences who acts as a mediator between the “interactive” teacher and the group, at the so-called “learner-support facilities”. In those lessons, the purpose of the activities is to strengthen the concepts taught by interactive teachers. Observations were made during those lessons.

The *Internet* hosts an academic portal available to students where they can find lesson summaries, *links* to electronic books and a virtual secretary office.

We chose to carry out a qualitative research. We interviewed 22 students out of a population of 205 students from the course of Pedagogical Sciences in the State of Rio de Janeiro. As the course lasts 7 semesters, we interviewed students from the 3rd, 5th and 7th semesters. Just three support facilities offer this course in the State. The distribution was: Paraty - 9 students,

Angra dos Reis - 8 students and Macaé - 5 students. To enrich data collection, we observed (attended) in full fifteen on-site lessons, in two cities (Paraty and Angra dos Reis). We chose interview and observation as data collection techniques.

RESULTS

MODES OF ADDRESS AND RECEPTION

Modes of address are management strategies for a certain audience (students in this case). The strategies applied in that course were all devised through tailor-made media environments. Thus, in the different environments, we sought the characteristics that favor interaction with students, the aspects connected with the position in which images place students and their own dynamics in order to check how the student interacts. Some examples of modes of address are provided below:

Interactive lessons

Interaction with students - Students are constantly invited by the teacher to share tele-lessons as if they were present in the classroom with the interactive teacher (specialist). The teacher frequently pretends that there is a "dialogue" between him, on the big screen, and the students in the classroom (audience). The teacher makes questions always looking at the students and answers them. He also frequently says: "Do you understand???" Other times: "Are you tired???" "I am waiting for your questions. Ask". These are deliberate examples, strategies used to bridge the gap between the interactive teacher and the students. The intention is to make the lesson look like an on-site lesson. Classrooms have a computer, under the responsibility of the local teacher, to interact through real-time conversations with a team of pedagogic mediation in Campo Grande, which filters questions for the interactive teacher. The student asks for attention, through a question, as in an on-site lesson. In this way, teacher and students hold a quick dialogue and at the same time allows students, on the big screen, to listen to the interactive teacher: "You, John Doe from the city of XX, who has just made an excellent question about..." since the local teacher, as a trained professional, is directed to read over again the

student's question in that way (identifying the city and, sometimes, also quoting the student's name). Therefore, addressing takes places and makes the student feel that he is recognized, that his name is spoken aloud for everybody to hear it, that he is identified. That mode of address seeks to position the student in a "social place" in his capacity as learner and strengthens his feeling of identification with the course.

Student's Portal

Interaction with students - The Portal interacts through the messages of its images. Example: "We are happy to see you (direct address)." All young white students, dressed in modern clothes, happy, smiling, waiting for the student to appear in the Portal. What does it mean? That this is a meeting place, a place to socialize, of cheerful, well-dressed people; consequently, addressing the following message to the new student: "You should wish to be like us!" In the University entrance examination calls, for example, we have actress Ana Hickmann in one of them. What does it mean? An invitation, a call to young people. Come on, "I, Ana", an icon of the big city, modern, contemporary, "am telling you that it is worth studying". This call, for a course mainly broadcasted inland, the fact that "Ana" is making a call represents an address, since she is a successful young lady from the big city calling young people from an inland city. Although the course is given twice a week and the research indicates that these learners already work, maybe are older, and perhaps did not have the chance to study "regularly when they were younger", the address directed to the student who will sit for the University entrance exam is currently fully directed to a younger audience.

ANALISYS OF INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Based on interview transcripts, we applied the content analysis methodology suggested by Bardin (2009). We offer a summary of the results after each question.

Question 1 of the interview held with students: Do you think that this course was made for people like you?

For **60%** of the interviewed students this course is intended for students who do not have much time, or who have no time to attend an on-site course on a daily basis. Even though the course coordination stated that it was devised for any student who finished high school, **35%** of the interviewed students considered that the course is directed to teachers or to those who already act in the classroom, and **15%** of the interviewed students with no teaching experience (they are not teachers) said that they found difficulties to grasp some contents. Even within that item, in particular, in the city of Paraty, *the geographical time* factor was a time ally, since the closest city for Paraty citizens to study, before the arrival of the University of Anhanguera-UNIDERP to the city, was Barra Mansa, which implied a daily journey of 5 hours or Niterói (on weekend).

Question 2 of the interview held with students: What are the meanings ascribed to the course by the student?

What reasons lead the student to take a distance course? Obviously, a variety of meanings are ascribed to the course by the student, but the possibility to study according to the EAD system was characterized as a true opportunity (**75%**), expressed by many as a dream that became true.

Question 3 of the interview held with students: What are the meanings ascribed to the teacher by the student?

Local teachers are held in high esteem by students. They are mentioned as “being always present”. Teachers answer questions, suggest activities seeking to socialize students in their class and social group. These professionals are related to the class with their presence, from the first semester and (normally) stay till graduation.

Question 4 of the interview held with students: What are the meanings ascribed by the student to the media environments: a) interactive lessons?

Interactive lessons and on-site lessons are the most highlighted media environments. As interactive lessons are concerned, in spite of being highlighted in course media environment, **30%** consider them good or interesting, **20%** consider them boring and tiring, since teachers read a lot and lessons are repeated and **15%** consider that lessons are too summarized. For

interactive lessons to truly meet their goal, their dynamics could be revisited according to students' suggestions (round table, live debate), apart from didactics improvement (for those cases in which there is too much *slide* live reading).

Question 5 of the interview held with students: What are the meanings ascribed by the student to the media environments: b) on-site lessons?

On-site lessons were highlighted as providing the possibility to the class, the social group, the individual to feel part of a larger whole, feel that they have their peers to communicate and a local teacher to resort to ask their questions. Local teachers are always praised.

Questions 6 e 7 of the interview held with students: What are the meanings ascribed by the student to the media environments: c) student's portal: self-study texts, slides of lessons and electronic tutorship?

Although we are speaking of distance education and technology, in fact the student does not fully master technological resources (TICs), since **20%** of the interviewed students still depend on third parties to satisfactorily carry out their research, their questions on the *Internet*, and on the student's portal. Other **25%** criticized the electronic tutorship, but we are uncertain as to how many others did not access the resource because they did not have full command of technology.

Questions 8 e 9 of the interview held with students: What are the meanings ascribed by the student to the media environments: d) portfolio and book e) assessments

The portfolio and the book appeared in **25%** of the interviews. They are aimed at providing support to the student. The portfolio, as the student moves forward, follows his learning path, his construction. The book has space for annotations. The student waits and receives the book at the beginning of each semester. Both resources should be maintained.

Question 10 of the interview held with students: What value is assigned to the course by the student?

As stated in interview answers, students like the course very much, they are happy and would even like the course to be more challenging, although

most of them can only devote two days a week to attend the course. The courses that are qualified as "very good" by **30%** of the students and as "good" by **55%** of the students have their merit.

CONCLUSION

When we see that students highlight on-site lessons precisely because they provide the possibility to the class, the social group, the individual to feel part of a larger whole, to feel that he has a space of interaction, of exchange, reminds us of Martin-Barbero when he insisted that the student, our receptor, would challenge the central role assigned to the king-text and to the message understood as a place of truthfulness which would circulate in communication. The student actually played that role in some modes of address received, mainly in the interactive lesson since, although it should have been the course star, was not assumed as such by students.

When students get to make their learning path without using all the media environments available, without fully mastering the technological resources (TICs), and, even though, like the course very much and do not drop out, the challenge and circulation that this communication articulates between the issuer – mode of address and the receptor is obvious.

There are many other models of distance courses. As the time factor was key to the answers, other models may even assess the possibility to offer the course just once a week, but that option would not bring students together in the class, a fact so much stressed in the research. This feeling would not be strengthened in the same way if the course were not given twice a week and maybe students would not spontaneously return to the classroom on a third day with such a high frequency for group work with just the obligation of once a week.

In other pedagogical models the role of the tutor is not always appraised. In this research, that professional was praised by students. The tutor is extremely important for course satisfaction.

In times of cyber-culture, any *online* service must meet its commitments. Therefore, we suggest that all those who establish a bidirectional

communication with the student check whether communication is working, so as not to receive comments from interviews about electronic tutorship stating that they “never answer” or that they “take a long time to answer”.

Tele-lessons by live satellite for hundreds of supporting facilities where a class gathers to attend lessons constitute a fantastic technological progress. For the domestic inland cities of our country, for many people, the real answers we get in the interviews held reflect a feeling: opportunities, dreams that become true. Therefore, we have to improve pedagogy and didactics. Teachers should read less and give a more interactive and dynamic lesson. However, the methodology is very good.

We are certain that this paper is just a starting point for new research, mainly in connection with distance undergraduate studies, but we believe that these data may be used by academic institutions and teaching teams studying the development of distance education methodology applied to undergraduate courses.¹

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